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My name is Esther Atkins Smith.

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I was born and raised right here in Salisbury, North Carolina.

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Although I went off to school, um, and lived in various places between the Washington DC

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area ( Maryland side) to San Antonio, Texas to Pittsburgh.

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I moved around a lot in my job.

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But, Salisbury is home and Salisbury is where I came to.

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I have history here.

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My mother was born and raised here.

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Her mother was born, and well, her mother was from Salisbury.

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Although she was from another county in North Carolina, she moved to Salisbury at a young

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age.

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I am so proud of where I came from, although most people would say that it was from poverty

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or it was from, uh, a low-income area or it's the projects.

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You know, the term projects has a very negative stigma to it.

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But I was, I grew up in Brookview Apartments.

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And then, during the time that I grew up there, neighbors knew each other.

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They welcomed each other, they looked out for each other.

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I ain't even know that it was considered, um, low income or poverty.

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I didn't know I was poor until probably a politician told us because I didn't experience

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that.

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I just experienced love and uh, anything that I needed or wanted I had because the

neighbors

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didn't mind pulling together and making sure that those that wanted to be successful

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were successful.

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So that was my community and at a very, very early age they taught me to read and reading

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was my escape.

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That's where I dreamed.

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That's where I knew the possibilities of life.

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It's because I was given the gift of reading and knowing that there was another world out

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there.

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I can remember at night, my mother says "it's time to go to bed."

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And so I would go upstairs to my room and then she'll say "lights off."

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Well I had a flashlight and I would continue to read with the flashlight.

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I went to Lincoln School.

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Elementary, I went there.

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I had a 4th grade teacher that told me that, "You're gonna do this work because I know

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you have it in you."

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And in high school, I loved math, and I had a math teacher named Ms. Butler that uh told

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me, "you will be going to college.

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You are, or you go as far as your dreams take you.

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Um, Just dream them.

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Be strong, have faith.

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Believe in the powers to be, In God and there is no place that you can't go."

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Most of us, or a lot of us have a difficult time putting ourselves in other peoples positions

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or in other people's lives and understanding where they're coming from.

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Not listening, not hearing and not feeling.

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Uh, we need to be able to, to hear.. you may not totally understand but you need to hear

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a person out and respect the differences and respect where they're coming from because

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it's kinda difficult to continue the prejudiceness if you, if that person is your brother, or

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that person is a dear friend.

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It's hard to continue those thoughts and then there are systematic or systemic prejudiceness.

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We need to recognize them and we need to acknowledge them.

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We are the ones that have to fix it.

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Instead of saying that "well I wasn't here when that happened or it's not my fault."

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We need to acknowledge that they're there and then decide what we need to do to fix it.

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And change is not always pretty.

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Change is not always easy and change most often hurt.

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But nonetheless we need to change things that we see that are not right.

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Salisbury can't be great until all of us are great.

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That we need to be aware of that.

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Aware that we're not here on this earth by ourselves and it is gonna take the whole

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of us to make Salisbury great, to make Rowan great.

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Be aware of the communities and the struggles and how we just want it to be better for everyone.